

Freedom in post- world war ii america essay sample

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



Not a Privilege for Every Citizen

After World War II the United States witnessed a period of unparalleled prosperity in its history. Having concentrated their energies and resources in the production of armaments, factories began concentrating in the production of a wide array of consumer goods: TV sets, dishwashers, cars, record players, and tape recorders. For the first time, many ordinary Americans could afford to buy these products. The United States was the world's largest industrial power and the richest nation in the world. It was the time of the "affluent society." 1 The G. I. Bill gave an unprecedented number of Americans the opportunity to acquire an education. In spite of this boom of prosperity and positive transformation of the country, racial minorities such as Latinos, Asians and African Americans had not received their fair share of education and job opportunities. African Americans in particular had been robbed of much of the freedom they had acquired after the Civil War (1861-1865).

After the abolition of slavery African Americans in the southern states enjoyed a certain measure of freedom. Under the protection of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1866, African Americans were allowed to vote, actively participate in political elections, buy the land of former owners, find their own employment, and use public accommodations along with Whites. 2 Obviously, the White southern population was not prepared to accept African Americans as equals and soon began to devise schemes to rob them of the freedom they had gained. The turning point in the struggle to suppress freedom for the Black people came when the Black Reconstruction Period

officially ended in 1877. In a shady deal to secure the presidency of the United States, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew Union troops from the South upon becoming president, essentially returning political control to southern Whites and turning a blind eye to the Jim Crow system Whites would gradually impose to reverse the gains African Americans had obtained on civil rights issues. 3

Some historians have made a distinction between Jim Crow laws and Jim Crow etiquette. 4 Jim Crow laws were designed to restrict the freedom of African Americans in all areas of life in order to show the superiority of the White population. These laws made them second class citizens: Blacks were systematically denied their voting rights by a series of laws designed to prevent them from exercising their political rights: Difficult literacy tests were instituted to prevent them from voting; poll taxes ensured that black voters would not have a voice in political elections because in many cases they lacked the financial means to pay these taxes.. Socially African Americans were excluded from restaurants, hotels and from schools and universities attended by Whites. They were relegated to second class facilities in public transportation, schools, libraries and lunch counters. There were also separate restrooms and drinking water fountains for Whites and Blacks. These laws gradually became more oppressive, especially in southern and southwestern states, affecting not only Blacks, but also other minority groups such as Mexicans living in Border States. The Jim Crow laws were legitimized by the Supreme Court landmark case Plessey vs. Ferguson (1896), which ruled that racial segregation was legal as long as there were separate but equal facilities. However, such facilities could hardly be said to

be equal since those intended for Blacks were mostly underfunded and of inferior quality.

Jim Crow etiquette norms governed all interactions between Blacks and Whites. Some of these norms included but were not limited to the following examples: Blacks and Whites were not supposed to eat together in the same facility, and if they did, there was supposed to be a partition separating both groups; Whites were not required to use courtesy titles of respect such as Mr. or Mrs. when addressing Blacks; Blacks were not supposed to display affection toward each other because these demonstrations offended White people. Interracial marriages were, of course, illegal. When conversing with Whites, Jim Crow etiquette prescribed that Blacks should never suggest or assert that a White person was lying; Blacks were not supposed to demonstrate superior knowledge or intelligence in front of a White person; under no circumstances were Black to accuse Whites of dishonorable intentions. 5

These restrictions of freedom were accompanied by waves of violence and terrorism perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan who resorted to whipping beating and lynching to instill fear among African Americans. Over time, the goals of the Ku Klux Klan became quite articulate: (1) to instill such fear among African Americans that they would be afraid to exercise their right to vote. (2) To deprive them of any land they might have acquired, and (3) to demoralize them to such an extent they would renounce any attempt to gain equality. 6

It is against these acts of repression, humiliation and injustice that one can best appreciate the yearning for true freedom on the part of Black

Americans. The courage they and many White sympathizers showed during the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s is worthy of praise. White sympathizers and African Americans alike had to muster sufficient courage to challenge white supremacy ideas and bigotry when they conducted various forms of protests such as marches and sit ins at lunch counters. The accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement are many. However, they came at a heavy price, for many Blacks and Whites lost their lives in the struggle. The achievements of the movement addressed primarily three areas of discrimination: education, social segregation and voting rights. Many achievements are worth noting, but chief among them are the following: 7 the Supreme Court's ruling in the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) declared school segregation unconstitutional, toppling down the doctrine of separate but equal public facilities, established in the Plessey vs. Ferguson case (1896). This ruling was soon followed by attempts to desegregate schools in places like Little Rock and Alabama. The Freedom Rides were attempts to end segregation in interstate buses. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by President Johnson, finally granted most of the demands civil rights leaders had been asking for. Business in the fields of food, shelter fuel and entertainment were mandated to sell their goods to everyone regardless of race. Henceforth everyone could use the same public facilities such as restrooms and water fountains. The Attorney General received the power to use the courts to enforce the desegregation of public areas. Job discrimination was outlawed, and federal funding to programs allowing racial discrimination could be withdrawn. Finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited all forms of racial discrimination in voting such as literacy

tests which in the past had prevented Blacks from voting.

Reflecting on the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, it is important to note that all is not triumph and rejoice. Fifty years after the Civil Rights era. The gap of education and economic inequality between Blacks and Whites continues to exist. Consequently, Blacks continue to be plagued by poverty, drugs and broken families. The gains made from the Civil Rights Movement did not magically cure these social ills, for their origins go as far back as when the first Black slaves arrived on American shores.

Nevertheless, if the Civil Rights Movement was not a panacea for all racial ills in American society, there is no doubt that it has contributed significantly to the advancement of social equality in America. This feeling is best echoed by President Barack Obama in his remarks at the LBJ Presidential Library Civil Rights Summit:

Because of the Civil Rights movement, because of the laws President Johnson signed, new doors of opportunity and education swung open for everybody -- not all at once, but they swung open. Not just blacks and whites, but also women and Latinos; and Asians and Native Americans; and gay Americans and Americans with a disability. They swung open for you, and they swung open for me. And that's why I'm standing here today -- because of those efforts, because of that legacy. 8

President Johnson was well aware that the achievement of racial equality would be a long and painful process despite the gains made by the new laws designed to lessen the gap of racial inequality: But even if we pass this bill the battle will not be over. . ." It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life." 9 Indeed, perhaps every

Black individual or even every member of a racial minority must wage his own individual right to secure his own rightful place in American society.

Notes

1 Norman, Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History*, 5th Edition, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 501.

2 " Reconstruction and Its Aftermath," *African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship*. Library of Congress, n. d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohhtml/exhibit/aopart5.html>

3Lowe, 487.

4 " Jim Crow Museum." Jim Crow Museum. Ferris State University, n. d. Web. 23 Oct. 2014. <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>

5" Jim Crow Museum.

6Lowe, 487.

7 " The African American Legacy and the Challenges of the 21st Century," *The African American Legacy and the Challenges of the 21st Century*. U. S. Department of the Interior, n. d. Web. 24 Oct, 2014 .

8 Barrack, H. Obama, " Remarks by the President at LBJ Presidential Library Civil Rights Summit." The White House. n. p., 14 Apr. 2-14. Web. 26 Oct. 2014. .

9 Lyndon, B. Johnson. "" We Shall Overcome."" The History Place. Great Speeches Collection. n. p., n. d. Web. 24 Oct. 2014. .

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